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The standard LDS historical narrative emphasizes the faith and tribulations of humble settlers and displaced immigrants. However, a closer examination of early church history reveals that the saints themselves were often instigators and aggressors in both action and theology. EvenJoseph Smith's recently introduced LDS scripture, the Book of Mormon, reads more similar in tone to the vengeful Old Testament than the new covenant of a forgiving Christ, with epic battles, religious conflict, cataclysmic destructions, as well as genocide and many other instances of violent death.

LDS history and doctrines exhibit a theme of militancy and righteous persecution, which fostered frontier violence and doctrines, including Brigham Young's doctrine of blood atonement and oath of vengeance upon the U.S. government for the assassination of the prophet. The strong theocratic (government ruled by religion) philosophies of Joseph and Brigham furthered violent Mormon culture. Mormons violated territorial boundaries and peace agreements, championed Zionist ideals in fiery speeches, threatened non-Mormons, and boasted of their regional political power.

Other isolationist sects in the region, such as the Mennonites and Shakers, managed to live peacefully within their communities. The Mormons experienced this combative culture with their neighbors largely due to their propensity to vote in nearly unanimous blocks and raise well-armed militias. After the exodus to Utah, the Missourians never bothered the Whitmerites, nor did the people of Illinois ever bother Emma Smith when she remained behind; however, Brigham's group was considered dangerous and anti-democratic.

The Mountain Meadows massacre in 1857 near what is now St. George, Utah, resulting in the wholesale slaughter of 120 innocent non-Mormon immigrants, including women and children by Mormon aggressors, was one of the largest losses of life in the westward migration saga, excluding various large scale massacres of Native Americans. Although Brigham Young appears not to have directly ordered the executions, historians conclude that his and other church leaders inflammatory

rhetoric played a pivotal role in inciting the massacre and that Young likely participated in the elaborate cover-up. The frontier environment of paranoia and government mistrust was exacerbated by the swiftly approaching U.S. Army, and Young's decision to place the entire territory under martial law.

LEARN MORE:

- The 1838 Mormon War
- The Mormon Rebellion
- *Sunstone*: *The Culture of Violence in Joseph Smith's Mormonism*, Quinn, Oct 2011

VIOLENT DOCTRINES

The narrative of the Book of Mormon suggests that the ancient Israelites who traveled here in a large sailing ship and became the ancestors of the American Indians were given both American continents as a "Promised Land" if they were righteous and obedient to the God of Christianity. The book suggests that righteous Gentiles could gain entry into the most favored Tribe of Israel, but the Lamanites alone were prophesied to "blossom as the rose" (D&C 49:24) after they embraced the restored gospel of Christ. Thus, Mormonism's first proselytizing mission within Mormonism was directed toward Native Americans in June 1830. The Book of Mormon declares itself to be written for the descendants of the people it describes, and it is important for the largely white colonial descendants who make up the membership of the modern LDS Church to recognize the political power and danger inherent in the violent prophecies and language of special covenant people of the Book of Mormon.

In the later parts of the Book of Mormon, the Lamanite descendants (Native Americans) are told that God says, "…I will establish my church among them, and they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob [Native Americans], unto whom I have given this land [America] for their inheritance; And they shall assist my people…[to] build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem" (3 Nephi 21:22-23). Simply put, this is a call for native Americans to join the white/Gentile members of the LDS Church and to begin to build up an actual city, a political goal.

The rise of the literal ruling city named New Jerusalem was not an ambiguous threat to non-Mormons, as Joseph Smith clearly manifest its specific Missouri location in the name of the Lord in his modern revelations to the members of his new American church. "Verily this is the word of the Lord that the city New Jerusalem shall be built by the gathering of the saints, beginning at this place, even the place of the temple, which temple shall be reared in this generation." (D&C 84:1-4). Such

biblical images were not merely spiritual in nature; they were a promise of God's power standing behind the rising political influence of the early LDS Church and Joseph Smith personally.

Read closely and with the mindset of the frontier time period, it becomes clear that the role of the American Indian in LDS doctrine was not limited to mere spiritual redemption from their fallen state, but that they would unite and use righteous force to reclaim God's intended glory. So many white settlers on the frontier had already experienced violence as they moved from the eastern United States to the West, where Native Americans still controlled vast swathes of land. The Book of Mormon prophesies that the Indians would one day go forth "as a lion" to lay waste to their oppressors and reclaim the land of their inheritance. The Indians were to "go through among them [Gentiles], and shall tread them down, and they shall be as salt that hath lost its savor…to be trodden under foot of my people…" (3 Nephi 16: 14-16, see also 3 Nephi 21:12-21). It did not help soothe the fears of non-Mormons that the term "weapons of war" appears 44 times in the Book of Mormon, approximately once every 11 pages, nor that there is a clear division of those who were faithful to God, and thus victorious in violent attacks, and those who were seen as wicked and deserving of bloody retribution.

It's important to set the scene for the tone of the Mormon/non-Mormon rivalry in the specific emotional political climate of the time period. Though Indian sympathizers had been gaining prominence, Andrew Jackson's election to the presidency of the United States in 1829 ushered in a dark era of Native American relations. President Jackson abruptly reversed policies of Native "civilization" and integration in favor of relocation, even extermination, which lead to the passage of the Indian Removal Act of May 26, 1830. As tensions rose, Mormonism was unique in promoting the subversive notion that God himself would soon raise up the Indians to destroy non-Mormon America.

The inherent threat of this early Mormon doctrine did not go unnoticed in American frontier towns where Indian relations remained tenuous. Missouri neighbors observed in a local newspaper as early as 1833, "We are daily told [by the Mormons]… that we, (the Gentiles,) of this county are to be cut off, and our lands appropriated by them for inheritances. Whether this is to be accomplished by the hand of the destroying angel, the judgments of God, or the arm of power, they are not fully agreed among themselves." [1] Talk of persecution or prejudice against early Mormons in the modern LDS church rarely takes these real fears into account.

The intensity of concern only grew stronger as the Church spread, prompting Federal Indian agents to pen letters of concern to superiors, including an 1843 warning "that a grand conspiracy is about to be entered into between the Mormons and the Indians to destroy all white settlements on the Frontier." [2] E.D. Howe similarly observed in 1834 that "one of the leading articles of faith is that

the Indians of North America, in a very few years, will be converted to Mormonism, and through rivers of blood will again take possession of their ancient inheritance." Of course, these concerns seem overblown in retrospect, but were valid during the period. For context, consider that the population of previously obscure Nauvoo rapidly grew to rival Chicago at the peak of its Mormon occupation.

Threatening language in the Book of Mormon that purports to come from God is repeated, as in this example: "I say unto you, that if the Gentiles do not repent…after they have scattered my people-Then shall ye, who are a remnant of the house of Jacob [Indians], go forth among them; and ye shall be in the midst of them who shall be many; and ye shall be among them as a lion among the beasts of the forest, and as a young lion among the flocks of sheep, who, if he goeth through both treadeth down and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver. Thy hand shall be lifted up upon thine adversaries, and all thine enemies shall be cut off…" (3 Nephi 20: 15-17).

Referring to any who opposed his plans as "adversaries" and "enemies", Joseph Smith's use of inflammatory rhetoric and images of lions tearing people in pieces was unlikely to ingratiate the neighbors who were trying to live peacefully around the new city of Nauvoo. He prophesied strongly, in the name of the Lord, of America's pending destruction and rise of Zion. In other writings besides the Book of Mormon, Smith continued along the same lines with, "I am prepared to say by the authority of Jesus Christ, that not many years shall pass away before the United States shall present such a scene of bloodshed as has not a parallel in the history of our nation. Pestilence hail famine and earthquake will sweep the wicked of this generation from off the face of this land to open and prepare the way for the return of the lost tribes of Israel from the north country. …Repent ye and embrace the everlasting covenant and flee to Zion [Missouri] before the overflowing scourge overtake you. For there are those now living upon the earth whose eyes shall not be closed in death until they see all these things which I have spoken fulfilled." [3]

While many modern members of the LDS Church have been taught that Smith was prophesying about the Civil War, his words can also be read as a threat of violence and insurrection supported by Mormon doctrines regarding Native Americans. Mormons aligning with Native Americans in violent political language against other white settlers would prove problematic in many ways.

The Salt Sermon

The threat of violence using the religious language of Mormonism continued throughout the founding era. In June 1838, shortly after he and Smith fled their banking scandal and collapsing church in Kirtland, Sidney Rigdon, First Counselor in the Presidency, delivered his infamous Salt

Sermon in Far West, MO. He warned dissenters to depart the territory under threat of harm, providing fuel to an already agitated situation.

Sidney Rigdon followed up his Salt Sermon speech with fiery rhetoric to a large crowd of believers on the 4th of July. He declared: "We take God and all the holy angels to witness this day, that we warn all men in the name of Jesus Christ, to come on us no more forever. For from this hour, we will bear it no more, our rights shall no more be trampled on with impunity. The man or the set of men, who attempts it, does it at the expense of their lives. And that mob that comes on us to disturb us; it shall be between us and them a war of extermination; for we will follow them till the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us: for we will carry the seat of war to their own houses, and their own families, and one party or the other shall be utterly destroyed." It is difficult to read this as anything less than a literal call to arms against non-Mormons.

Thus, when Governor Lilburn Boggs used the term "extermination" in his October 27, 1838 expulsion order, he was merely drawing upon the inflammatory language of Rigdon's recent introduction. Boggs declared "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace—their outrages are beyond all description."

The Danites

The cycle of responding in-kind to persecution with further threats of violence begins in earnest with Mormonism. Promptly following Rigdon's "Salt Sermon" a secret vigilante group known as The Danites arose to enforce strict orthodox beliefs on Mormon communities. The group's original task was to target dissenters within the Church, but they also presented themselves as the vanguard of Mormon political interests and protectors of true believers. One violent incident broke out on August 6, 1838, in Gallatin, Missouri when county officials refused to let Mormons vote in the city's local elections. A brawl quickly ensued between a group of Danites and anti-Mormons onlookers, and though no one was killed, the "incident smashed the fragile peace that had prevailed in upper Missouri." [4] Danite activities from this point began taking a dark turn, often involving themselves in clandestine radical activities, including in the looting and destruction of non-Mormon settlements.

On July 27, 1838, Joseph recorded in his journal that Danites were organized according to revelation to "put right physically that which is not right, and to cleanse the Church of very great evils which hath hitherto existed among us." This inconvenient portion of his journal was later crossed out and omitted from various official Church histories. While LDS apologists suggest that Joseph did not sanction the secret band, Joseph's records and intimate involvement in every aspect of early Mormonism indicate that he did. Though Mormons were undeniably the targets of violence

and persecution, they seemed equally adept at responding in-kind to those whom they perceived as threats.

In 1992, Dean Jessee published a second volume of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, including the part of Smith's diary which had been previously omitted, thereby directly refuting the longstanding claim that Joseph did not sanction the Danites organization. [5] "Historians need no longer argue if the Danites existed, or if they did 'bad things' to the gentiles. …the answer to both questions was yes." [6] Today, the Church suggests that "Historians generally concur that Joseph Smith approved of the Danites but that he probably was not briefed on all their plans and likely did not sanction the full range of their activities." [7]

Governor Lilburn Boggs

Additional perspective into the threat of violence against those whom the Mormons viewed as opposition comes from the assassination attempt against the former governor of Missouri, Lilburn W. Boggs. On May 6, 1842, an unidentified gunman repeatedly shot Boggs through a window at his residence in Independence, Missouri. Two bullets penetrated his head and a third lodged in his body; miraculously, he lived. Many saints rejoiced the attack as prophecy fulfilled, as suspicion immediately fell upon Joseph Smith and his notorious friend and bodyguard, Orrin Porter Rockwell.

A vivid imagination was not required to associate the Mormon experience in Missouri, which would later become known as the *1838 Mormon War*, with motive. Reflecting the self-righteous tone of the Mormon movement at the time, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal, "Thus this ungodly wretch has fallen in the midst of his iniquity…and the vengeance of God has overtaken him," along with a sketch of Boggs being shot in the head with an arrow. Joseph Smith himself, mere weeks after the assassination attempt, couldn't help but declare at a public gathering that "God would seek judgment on all the corrupt Missouri leaders who had inflicted trauma on the church."

Rumors began to circulate even before John C. Bennett, Smith's former presidency counselor, fanned the flames by asserting that Smith had been conspiring to kill Boggs since the previous summer. Joseph H. Jackson, another former intimate of Smith, similarly claimed that Smith confided in him that he ordered the murder. It did not help that this was not the first time Smith had been accused of conspiring to do away with a vocal critic. He had been arrested in 1837 and tried for conspiracy to murder Grandison Newell, who remained outspoken following the collapse of Smith's illegal Kirtland bank. Even one of Smith's most loyal followers, Orson Hyde, was said to have testified that, "Smith seemed much excited and declared that Newell should be put out of the way, or where the crows could not find him: he said destroying Newell would be justifiable in the sight of

God, that it was the will of God." [8] Though Smith and his church presidency counselor were convicted of the illegal banking activities, he was acquitted of Grandison's accusation.

Thomas Carlin, governor of Illinois, in reply to Joseph Smith's letter in which he protested his innocence while blaming his critics for the excitement, stated that it was common knowledge that he "had prophesied that Boggs should die a violent death." Describing the episode in *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, Benjamin Park recounts how Carlin reminded Smith that "the swirling rumors did not originate with Bennett…because he had heard similar tales of Smith's quest for justice for over a year, from multiple sources."

Upon recovering from his grievous injuries, Boggs signed an affidavit claiming to be in possession of evidence implicating Smith as an accessory before the fact of the intended murder. On July 22, Thomas Reynolds, newly installed as governor of Missouri, signed an extradition requisition for Smith's arrest. Governor Carlin, having just lost the election to Thomas Ford, promptly responded by signing a warrant for Smith's arrest. Thus, the prophet found himself threatened by powerful leaders with valid documentation from multiple states.

To briefly summarize the events that transpired, Smith prepared for the coming storm by leveraging his influence as Nauvoo's ecclesiastic, military and political leader to hastily enact a series of unprecedented, arguably illegal, habeas corpus laws as well as a host of additional local ordinances which ensured that his own courts and councils would retain control over the "origin, validity and legality" of any warrant. Benjamin Park describes how "the Mormon City Council was now passing ordinances that surpassed these (established laws) boundaries. It had granted the municipal court the authority to try the merits of cases, not just of arrests, as well as of the cases that originated outside its jurisdiction." [9] The Nauvoo City Council went so far as to enact additional statutes to personally punish any law enforcement officer who refused to comply with its kangaroo court.

On August 8, Thomas King, a neighboring county's Sheriff, arrived in Nauvoo accompanied by officers from Illinois and Missouri to present the warrant for Smith and Rockwell's arrest. Rebuffed by Nauvoo's unprecedented interpretation of municipal law, Smith managed to avoid extradition and was instead turned over to his own city marshal, where he suffered no immediate consequence. The frustrated officers departed Nauvoo empty handed, much to the ire of the governors, each of whom offered bounties for the arrest of the fugitives.

Apparently holding little confidence that Nauvoo's municipal trickery would withstand scrutiny, Smith immediately fled the scene and could not be located when King returned two days later to rearrest him. Smith remained on the run most of the remainder of 1842, protected and sheltered by his loyal followers, even as various authorities attempted to locate him.

Within only days of exile, the prophet focused some of his attention on securing the company of young Sarah Ann Whitney, whom he had secretly married on July 27. Containing a series of love letters, special blessings and assurances of eternal salvation, even a "pretend wedding" to her family relative and the transfer of church property, it would become one of the most extensively documented and illustrative courtships in Smith's career.

Joseph Smith's political maneuverings in the August election cycle and alliances to support candidates that could be sympathetic to the Mormon plight were about to pay off. His ability to provide bloc voting among his loyal followers had heavily influenced the election of Thomas Ford to the Illinois governorship, along with numerous Democratic candidates, garnering new friendships he would soon desperately need. Remaining fearful of Missouri justice, Smith worked in exile through intermediaries to secure a hearing in Illinois jurisdiction, likely counting on its animosity towards its neighboring state to afford him a favorable chance. Having secured what many considered his best path forward, and having grown weary of the fugitive lifestyle, he surrendered on December 27 and made his way to Springfield. Despite the very public spectacle, Judge Pope conducted a rather collegial hearing before deeming the Missouri extradition warrant invalid on technical grounds and releasing Smith with an admonition to "refrain from all political electioneering."

Upon returning home, no doubt jubilant over his astonishing victory, the prophet promptly refocused his attention on critical business and church matters, such as increasing his salary as Mayor of Nauvoo to $500 annually. And before hosting a large party at his mansion on the evening of January 18th with hundreds of saints in attendance, he married 16 year old Sarah Longstroth and her 14 year old sister to trusted aid Willard Richards.

Porter Rockwell managed to avoid capture until being apprehended in St. Louis on March 6, 1843. He spent eight months in jail accused of the attempted assassination, but was ultimately released for lack of evidence. During his incarceration, he managed to briefly escape from an Independence jail before recapture, and was tried and convicted of jailbreak. Historians have noted that the dates of Rockwell's temporary absence in May 1842 from Nauvoo coincide neatly with a possible trip to Independence. Many, including Rockwell's sympathetic biographer, Harold Schindler, suggest he most likely did attempt to assassinate the Missouri governor. [10] Rockwell's violent tendencies, including a number of well documented murders, continued in the Utah era under Brigham Young.

Though Smith would soon find himself entangled in numerous additional legal scrapes, his secretive and ongoing practice of polygamy would become the focus of his greatest fears. On June 27, 1844, the day Joseph Smith was killed, William Law recorded in his diary: "He [Smith] was unscrupulous; no man's life was safe if he was disposed to hate him. He set the laws of God and men at defiance." Law believed that Smith played a role in the attempted assassination and later reported that Smith

told him, “I sent Rockwell to kill Boggs, but he missed him, it was a failure; he wounded him instead of sending him to Hell.” Whatever the truth may be, it’s clear that Joseph Smith was a skilled political and religious operator with loyal followers and friends in high places.

Thomas Marsh

Another example of Mormons responding to the violence around them is found in Thomas Marsh, who’s actions generated one of Mormonism’s longest enduring myths. Church Sunday school curriculum has maintained the overly-simplified explanation that Apostle Marsh left the Church because he was offended over a milk sharing arrangement. According to the story, one of the women was skimming more than her share of cream.

This narrative is demonstrably false, as Marsh actually left the Church over his discomfort with the increasing violence of the Saints, while publicly speaking against Smith’s misuse of funds. Marsh himself declared, “I have left the Mormons and Joseph Smith for conscience sake, and that alone, for I have come to the full conclusion that he is a very wicked man; notwithstanding all my efforts to persuade myself to the contrary.” [11]

Oath of Vengeance

Even in the Mormon temple, where the spirit of God is to be most welcome, violence is a theme, and remained so for nearly a century until it was removed. Soon after Joseph Smith’s death in 1844, the Oath of Vengeance was added to the LDS temple ceremony. “You and each of you do covenant and promise that you will pray and never cease to pray to Almighty God to avenge the blood of the prophets upon this nation, and that you will teach the same to your children and to your children’s children unto the third and fourth generation.”

Such canonized theology amplified the “us vs. them” thinking, which remains a subtle theme in Mormonism today. The sacred practice of covenanting to teach vengeance to children was not eliminated until approximately the early 1930s. And even after that, violent oaths and pantomimed penalties persisted in LDS temples until 1990. Though the actual pantomiming of penalties was removed in 1990, the signs of violent oaths and penalties remain a prominent feature in temple ceremony to this day. Anyone that attended an LDS temple ceremony pre-1990 knows exactly what the current signs represent.

LEARN MORE:

- MormonThink – Oath of Vengeance

Blood Atonement

The language of redemption grew more intense as the Saints moved west and Brigham Young became the prophet and leader of the Church. Young authored the notion that certain sins were so grievous that the Savior's atoning sacrifice was insufficient; that only the spilling of the individual's own blood may qualify them for redemption. Brigham's extreme doctrine and strong theocratic tendencies contributed greatly to a perpetual atmosphere of frontier justice.

BRIGHAM YOUNG, BY GEORGE A. CROFUTT

Brigham taught that a person who "has committed a sin that he knows will deprive him of that exaltation which he desires, and that he cannot attain to it without the shedding of his blood, and also knows that by having his blood shed he will atone for that sin, and be saved and exalted with the Gods, is there a man or woman in this house but what would say, 'shed my blood that I may be saved and exalted with the Gods?' All mankind love themselves, and let these principles be known by an individual, and he would be glad to have his blood shed. That would be loving themselves, even unto an eternal exaltation. Will you love your brothers or sisters likewise, when they have committed a sin that cannot be atoned for without the shedding of their blood? Will you love that man or woman well enough to shed their blood? That is what Jesus Christ meant."

"I could refer you to plenty of instances where men have been righteously slain, in order to atone for their sins. I have seen scores and hundreds of people for whom there would have been a chance…if their lives had been taken and their blood spilled on the ground as a smoking incense to the Almighty…" [12]

Lest we attempt to discard blood atonement doctrine to the misguided ramblings of one early prophet, prominent LDS scholar Bruce R. McConkie advocated in 1967 that the doctrine could one day again be practiced. He exclaimed, "This doctrine of blood atonement can practice, can operate in a day when church and state are combined." [13]

As late as the 1990s, blood atonement remained an issue. "In the past decade [1984-1994], potential jurors in every Utah capital homicide were asked whether they believed in the Mormon concept of 'Blood Atonement.'" [14] The concept of righteous violence seems to permeate early Mormon doctrine and culture.

LEARN MORE:

- Blood Atonement

MURDER OF JESSE HARTLEY

The murder of Jesse Hartley illustrates the violent culture of Brigham Young's unchecked power over Utah Valley. Within eight months of arriving in Utah, the young attorney was murdered in cold blood by Brigham's confessed enforcer, Bill Hickman.

Arriving in Salt Lake City in Sept 1853, Jesse promptly began representing clients. David Hull, a wealthy non-member client, was poisoned to death under suspicious circumstances before his trial could commence. The following day, Hartley was falsely accused by two separate Mormons of stealing a horse and money. In response to what he had witnessed during his brief tenure in the community, Jesse penned an urgent letter to the Secretary of War, warning of a "coming storm… brewing in the Territory," requesting Federal intervention to restore rule of law. Hartley's letter suggested that Hull was "charged with larceny…for no other purpose than to get hold of his property." Unfortunately, Hartley was unaware that mail departing Utah Valley was screened; his letter was intercepted, ultimately residing in Brigham Young's possession.

Upon obtaining a hearing on Sept 30, the judge released Hartley, finding insufficient cause to detain him. There exist ample documentation and context to suggest that frivolous lawsuits were a common tactic to extract money and property from strangers to the Valley. The following day, despite his acquittal, *Deseret News* – controlled by the Church – published a statement accusing Hartley of theft. With his reputation tarnished, Jesse relocated near Spanish Fork and accepted a teaching position. Things appeared to settle down, as Hartley joined the Church in January 1854 and restarted his law practice.

Jesse remained in good standing on April 8, receiving a call to serve a mission to Texas on the first day of General Conference. The very next day, Brigham Young stood before the congregation and denounced Jesse, accusing him of being "a vagrant, thief and a robber." Brigham declared he "…ought to have his throat cut…ought to be baptized in Salt Lake with stones tied to him…to wash away one hundredth part of his sins." The Prophet then motioned that Hartley be cut off from the Church. Despite protesting his innocence, he was excommunicated. Lacking any evidence, Jesse's status devolved from missionary to threatened apostate within 24 hours.

On May 3, 1854, less than a month following Brigham's condemnation and threats, Bill Hickman, Brigham's enforcer, murdered Jesse Hartley as he fled toward Fort Bridger. Michael Marquardt

surmised, “Faithful [Mormons] may well object that the chain of evidence connecting the second prophet of their faith to the murder…is circumstantial. The weight of evidence, however, is shifting to support the conclusion that Brigham Young was ready to take whatever steps he felt necessary to defend Mormonism.”

LEARN MORE:

- *The Coming Storm: The Murder of Jesse Hartley,* H. Michael Marquardt
- *Brigham’s Destroying Angel,* William Hickman
- *Reminiscences of Early Utah,* Robert Baskin

CASTRATION OF THOMAS LEWIS

In addition to suggesting the murder of an innocent from the stand in LDS General Conference, Brigham Young condoned more subtle, yet equally outrageous methods of violence against those who dared to stand in righteous opposition to unchecked LDS authority. Particularly during Young’s Mormon Reformation, a period of intense religious zealotry intended to “purify” and recommit Church members, the frequency of atrocities escalated.

Warren Snow was the Bishop of the LDS Church in Manti, UT in 1857. Though he already had several wives, another young lady caught his eye. Undeterred by her engagement to twenty-four year old Thomas Lewis, Bishop Snow pursued her hand in marriage, of course insisting that it was God’s will. When repeatedly rebuffed by the young lady, he attempted to dispose of Lewis by sending him on a mission; an offer he promptly refused.

To be fair, frontier justice was an unfortunate reality of the period, and it appears that Lewis was himself a violent man who had tried to murder someone with a shovel. Regardless of Lewis’ temper, this horrific event revolves around specific cultural and religious pressures, and his involvement with a women that Snow wanted for himself.

While being transported by authorities to Salt Lake, Thomas Lewis was pulled from his horse, brutally castrated and left in the open to suffer his own fate. In May 1857, Bishop Snow’s counselor wrote that young Lewis ‘has now gone crazy’ after being violated by Bishop Snow.

The incident appears to have garnered more attention than the Church desired, prompting Brigham Young to write a letter to Bishop Warren S. Snow in July 1857 instructing him to “Just let the matter drop, and say no more about it…and it will soon die away among the people.” President Young’s

attitude toward righteous violence seemed little changed by June 1857, when Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal, “Brigham said the day would come when thousands would be made Eunochs (a man who has been castrated) in order for them to be saved in the kingdom of God.” [15] This was the same year when Young was publicly preaching his extreme doctrine of blood atonement.

Federal authorities sought Snow’s capture, but with little cooperation from the Mormons, he was never brought to justice for his actions.

ILLUSTRATION BY HENRY DAVENPORT NORTHRUP

MOUNTAIN MEADOWS MASSACRE

Perhaps the most shameful example of Mormon frontier violence is Mountain Meadows. September 11, 1857, marks the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a five-day long siege that culminated in the indiscriminate slaughter of 120 California-bound men, women, and children at the hands of Mormon militiamen from Parowan and Cedar City, Utah. The massacre, and the nuanced context surrounding it provide the sharpest example of the effects of early Mormon ideology in tightly controlled and isolated groups.

Brigham Young is well documented to have taught violent doctrines, coupled with the notion that Mormonism would eventually overtake the U.S. Government in partnership with the Indians. Immediately upon being appointed “Prophet, Priest and King” within the Council of 50, he said, “I tell

you in the name of the Lord when we go from here, we will exalt the standard of liberty and make our own laws. When we go from here we don't calculate to go under any government but the government of God. There are millions of the Lamanites who when they understand the law of God and the designs of the gospel are perfectly capable of using up these united States. They will walk through them and lay them waste from East to West. We mean to go to our brethren in the West & baptise them, and when we get them to give hear to our council the story is told." [16]

It is important to note that relations between the Mormons and the various Indian tribes in the vicinity were often strained to the point that Young seemed to see them more as pawns in his own plans than as actors on their own. In the case of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, it will be demonstrated that he was perfectly willing to let the "savage" Indians be blamed for the atrocity rather than admitting to the true narrative.

In July 1853, Chief Wa-Kara rode in procession into Salt Lake to lodge a complaint against the Mormons, claiming that they were killing settlers and blaming the Indians who bore the repercussions – a practice for which Young never disciplined Mormons. An example of this includes John Williams Gunnison's surveying party of 8, which was murdered in October 1853, after which Church leaders blamed the murders on local Indians.

In Spring of 1856, Brigham Young initiated a "reformation," resulting in increased fanaticism, control, and violence. Young's fixation on chastising the membership intensified, while he perpetually feared that the truth would escape Utah Valley, prompting the intervention of Federal troops. Wilford Woodruff recorded his conversation with Young in his journal on June 1, 1857, "I wish there was some people on Earth who could tell us just how much sin we must sustain before we can chastize the people and correct their errors. The wicked may go to the states & call for troops." These sentiments provided the backdrop to the Mountain Meadows massacre, as Mormons imagined themselves persecuted by anyone not dogmatically committed to their ideology, with danger threatening from all sides. As this attitude had led to violence from Mormons in Nauvoo, so it did again here.

Brigham Young's relations with the U.S. federal government remained similarly adversarial. As early as March 1849, Young had been escalating his fiery rhetoric, declaring Deseret a "free and independent government." The government remained at odds with Utah Territory, and Young in particular. In Sept 1857, Brigham Young declared the State of Deseret (Utah) to be a free and independent people, no longer bound by the laws of the United States, while ordering Saints in California and Nevada to sell their property and return to Zion to fight the Government. Young publicly announced that he alone would decide which laws would be obeyed in Utah.

President James Buchanan appears justified when, after repeated diplomatic efforts had failed, he declared Utah Territory to be in a state of rebellion, sending the U.S. Army to remove Young as Governor and re-appoint federal officials, all but one of which had fled the territory under threat from the Mormons. He warned the insurrectionists to "expect no further lenity, but look to be rigorously dealt with." [17]

By the time the wealthy, California bound Fancher wagon train rolled into Utah Valley in the fall of 1857, tension and paranoia raged. The U.S. Army was stationed to the south in Cedar City, awaiting the passing of winter before advancing to Salt Lake. Complicating matters further, a month before the emigrants departed Arkansas on their journey west, Parley P. Pratt, a prominent LDS Apostle, was killed by the estranged husband of his twelfth wife. Rumors circulated down the Valley, denigrating the emigrants, falsely suggesting that they had participated in Pratt's demise and that they'd poisoned an Indian well. Apostate Mormons, desperate to escape the Valley alive, fell in with the caravan for safe passage out of the tightly controlled territory. The stage was set for a perfect "us" vs. "them" showdown.

Motivated by the approaching army and a desperate need to keep capital in the region, Young sent George A. Smith of the twelve apostles on a speaking tour through Southern Utah in which he instructed the Saints not to trade with any passing emigrants and stoked fear throughout the region with his fiery rhetoric regarding the approaching army. Denied resupply along the entire Wasatch Front, the Fancher caravan pushed farther south, desperately searching for anyone willing to trade and resupply their party. Brigham was later quoted as referring to the emigrants as wicked, and not to let them pass. Joseph Walker disobeyed his local Bishop, grinding the wagon party's grain, resulting in his excommunication. The us vs. them dynamic was pushed to greater extremes when Young also ordered Mormons to stop trading with the Indians, vacated many settlements and consolidated people in key cities while ordering the consecration of all excess animals. Some protested and were excommunicated, increasing the pressure to conform to the prophet's commands.

While the Saints' willingness to follow Young's violent rhetoric to real, physical violence may seem difficult to reconcile using modern standards, Young regularly pontificated upon his sole authority, even suggesting "I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture." [18] In addition, Young's sweeping reformation throughout the Utah territory in 1856-1857 required the majority of Church members to be rebaptized as a symbol of their undying commitment to the Church.

The Fancher party eventually obtained shelter in beautiful and lush Mountain Meadows, to the south of Salt Lake. While the party rested and watered their stock, nearby Mormon leaders,

including Isaac C. Haight (LDS Stake President) and John D. Lee (local Indian liaison and adopted son, sealed to Brigham Young), plotted an attack on the wealthy wagon train believing that the men of the company should atone for their supposed sinful actions. Intending from the very beginning to create the appearance of Native American aggression to disguise their own actions, the militia schemed to arm Southern Paiutes and persuade them to join their larger party of militiamen—disguised as Native Americans—in an attack.

The next day on September 5th, Cedar City Stake President Isaac C. Haight called a high council together after sending John D. Lee to organize the Paiute Indians, who had already surrounded the Baker-Fancher Party at Mountain Meadows. The council debated the fate of the wagon party. Haight proposed that the men be brought to justice, inciting a range of inflammatory remarks among the men in attendance regarding the Arkansans. One high councilman, Laban Morrill, was deeply troubled by the mob-like emotion developing in the room and insisted that a rider be sent to Salt Lake City to receive Brigham Young's opinion on the matter.

Although a rider was sent that night, no one waited for a response. Instead, Haight hastily ordered Parowan Stake President and Militia leader, William H. Dame, to surround the Fancher company. Still determined to punish the wagon train, Haight exclaimed, "I am prepared to feed to the Gentiles the same bread they fed to us. God being my helper, I will give the last ounce of strength and if need be my last drop of blood in defense of Zion." Dame's militia soon surrounded the wagon party as commanded. The rider returned from Salt Lake just days later with a letter from Young, commanding the men to let the wagon party pass unmolested; unfortunately the letter arrived too late.

The Assault

During the militia's first assault, the well-equipped wagon train fought back, beginning a five-day siege. Three men attempted to escape the wagon train to seek help. Two of the men were promptly shot, while the third retreated back to the wagon party, having obtained a clear view of the Mormon attackers. Fear soon spread among the militia's leaders that some emigrants had caught sight of white men, fueling their anxieties regarding the approaching U.S. army, out to rein in the Mormons. If the Baker-Fancher party was permitted to go on their way, militia leaders felt that they would relay the story of their attack when they arrived in California and the whole territory of Utah would be implicated in the misdeed.

A complicated series of exchanges and communications wound its way on horseback between local Stake leaders and Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. John D. Lee would later claim that the High Council had met and voted Friday morning to kill all the emigrants, though this seems

uncorroborated. Regardless of whichever disputed narrative one chooses to accept, the irrefutable result was that militia commander William H. Dame ordered his forces to kill all the emigrants.

Following a few days pinned down without water, William Aden of the Fancher party volunteered to ride north to find the Dukes Train party of emigrants near Cedar City for help. He managed to sneak out of camp, but was shot by the Mormons whose campfire he approached for help. As the emigrants quickly exhausted water and provisions, they allowed some members of the militia—who carried a white flag—to enter their camp. John D. Lee cold-bloodedly lied to them, saying that the Indians had departed, and promising that if the Arkansans would only lay down their arms, he and his men would escort them to safety. Having no other choice, the emigrants conceded.

The wagon party was then separated into three distinct groups – the wounded and youngest children led the way in two wagons; the women and older children walking behind, while the men were individually escorted by an armed member of the militia. Lee led his charges three-quarters of a mile to a southern branch of the California Trail. Thus separated, the groups were easier to deal with. Suddenly, a single shot rang out, followed by an order: “Do your duty!” The Mormon escorts promptly turned and shot the men in cold blood, making it impossible for them to protect the women in children. Meanwhile painted “Indians” jumped out of the brush and cut down defenseless women and children where they stood.

Though difficult to verify retroactively under a fog of violence, it has been alleged that the attackers were directed to slit the throats of disaffected leaders in blood oath style after shooting them. In any case, that night, John Lee swore all to secrecy, each man standing in circle, hand on his brother’s shoulder, taking the oath of death to any man who talked. Any Mormon who attended the LDS temple prior to 1990 will recognize the penal oath ritual and corresponding hand signals.

The Cover-up

Following the massacre, the perpetrators hastily buried the victims in the rocky terrain, exposing the bodies to wild animals and the climate. Local LDS families assimilated the surviving 17 children under 8 years of age (the age of accountability according to Mormon doctrine), intentionally separating siblings so they couldn't talk about it together. All wagons, stock, and clothes were divided among local Church members or sent to Salt Lake City. The entire episode was made to disappear. A few days after the massacre, Indian agent Garland Hurt was tipped of a pending attack on his life, even as a large group approached his house. He narrowly escaped east, the last non-Mormon federal official to exit Utah. Hurt's report of the incident became the first account on the official record.

Initially, the LDS Church denied any involvement and attempted to remain silent on the massacre issue. An early investigation was conducted by Brigham Young, who interviewed John D. Lee on September 29th, 1857. Young sent a report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs declaring the massacre to be the work of Native Americans. The Utah War delayed further investigation within the isolated territory by the U.S. government until 1859, when Jacob Forney and Major James Henry Carleton conducted investigations. Carleton's investigation found women's hair tangled in sagebrush and the bones of children still in their mothers' arms. Carleton later said it was "a sight which can never be forgotten." Carleton's troops collected the scattered bones and remains, buried them nearby and erected a cairn and cross with the inscription, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay saith the Lord."

Brigham Young visited the massacre site in May 1861 with a group of some 60 Saints. Viewing the inscription on the cross, Wilford Woodruff recorded President Young as saying, “it should be vengeance is mine and I have taken a little.” The cross was ordered torn down, the cairn dismantled, leaving little to mark the location.

Captain James Lynch, who visited the site of the massacre in 1859, recorded his impressions: “The scene of the fearful murder still bears evidence of the atrocious crime, charged by the Mormons and their friends to have been perpetrated by Indians but really by Mormons disguised as Indians, who in their headlong zeal, bigotry and fanaticism deemed this a favorable opportunity of at once wreaking their vengeance on the hated people of Arkansas, and of making another of these iniquitious ‘Blood offerings’ to God so often recommended by Brigham Young and their other leaders. For more than two square miles the ground is strewn with the skulls, bones and other remains of the victims. In places water has washed many of these remains together, forming little mounds, raising monuments as it were to the cruelty of man to his fellow man. Here and there may be found the remains of an innocent infant beside those of some devoted mother, ruthlessly slain by men worse than demons; their bones lie bleaching in the noon day sun a mute but eloquent appeal to a just but offended God for vengeance. I have witnessed many harrowing sights on the fields of battle, but never did my heart thrill with such horrible emotions, as when standing on that silent plain contemplating the remains of the innocent victims of Mormon avarice, fanaticism and cruelty.” While there was plenty of bad blood between the U.S. Army and the Mormons, this report seems too harrowing to be anything but the unvarnished truth.

Wilford Woodruff’s official Church version of the massacre, produced after Young’s death, is full of heightened rhetoric of persecution of Mormons, accusing “mobbers” (the Fancher-Baker party) of damning Brigham Young and other Church leaders, of wanting to do evil and poisoning an Indian well. He further denied that the Church had seized the wagon party’s property while blaming the massacre on local Indian tribes.

In the end, only John D. Lee was tried in a court of law, although eight other men were charged with leading the slaughter (each escaped capture by the authorities). Lee acknowledged his participation in the massacre, but insisted that he was being used as a scapegoat to avoid further responsibility being placed on Brigham Young. Executed by firing squad on March 23, 1877, nearly twenty years after the massacre, Lee cited the following oath in his confession shortly before his execution: “I believed then as I do now, that it was the will of every true Mormon in Utah, at that time, that the enemies of the Church should be killed as fast as possible, and that as this lot of people had men amongst them that were supposed to have helped kill the Prophets in the Carthage jail, the killing of all of them would be keeping our oaths and avenging the blood of the Prophets.” Interestingly, he seemed to have lost his fervor for blind obedience, for he said, “I do not believe everything that is

now being taught by Brigham Young. I believe he is leading the people astray, downward to destruction." [19]

It is worth noting that the man who was first to publicly expose the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Philip Klingensmith, was found dead in a prospector's hole in Mexico in August 1881. A former LDS Bishop, he feared he would be killed for his testimony in John D. Lee's trial – and it seems he was indeed.

The Church eventually excommunicated only two individuals for their actions regarding the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Isaac C. Haight and John D. Lee. The fact that each of their eternal blessings were quietly restored indicates to some that the Church acknowledges to a degree how the toxicity surrounding violent doctrine may have acted as a catalyst. Voltaire's words perfectly fit this episode of Mormon history: "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can also make you commit atrocities."

MORMON JESUS

If one's beliefs influence their judgments and actions, it seems appropriate to consider the role violence plays in Mormon doctrine. The reader of the Book of Mormon doesn't make it four chapters before the Lord commands the decapitation of an unconscious man, enabling the protagonist to relieve him of his property. There are many other bloody scenes, as the work is essentially a nonstop tale of epic battles and massive destructions, culminating in the annihilation of millions of people in a single battle. Furthermore, the Jesus portrayed in the Book of Mormon remains an Old Testament, vengeful type, despite his followers supposedly adhering to the New Covenant of baptism and repentance.

In 3 Nephi 9 we hear in the words of Christ, "…that great city Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof. And behold, that great city Moroni have I caused to be sunk in the depths of the sea, and the inhabitants thereof to be drowned…" Fifteen other great cities were additionally burned with fire, sunk in the depths, covered with earth, drowned or buried. "And many great destructions have I caused to come upon this land, and upon this people…because of their wickedness in casting out the prophets."

While the notion of God's epic annihilation of numerous great cities without leaving a trace merits further consideration, the most critical assault on the narrative's credibility is found in Christ's own rebuke of violence just a few days prior (see Luke 9:53-56). After the transfiguration on the Mount, Jesus set out towards Jerusalem, sending disciples ahead to secure accommodation for the night. When refused, James and John became enraged, inquiring of the Lord, "wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven…" to destroy the village. Jesus rebuked them, reminding "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And they went to another village."

The Book of Mormon asserts that mere days later, Christ killed millions of innocent people. One may be left to wonder why He enforced no such vengeance, rather unconditional forgiveness, upon those halfway around the world – the ones that heard his words and still put him to death. Further, many struggled to reconcile Christ's instruction to "forgive them, for they know not what they do" with the unprecedented destruction suggested in the Book of Mormon.

CONCLUSION

Like so many aspects of Mormon history, the official narrative regarding the role of hostile neighbors and unjustified persecution in the forging of Latter-day Saints glosses over unsavory and less faith inspiring truths. In reality, the Church's own inflammatory doctrines and rhetoric introduced themes of self-righteous violence that often made the Mormons abrasive neighbors. LDS prophets and early Church leaders encouraged their religious dogmatism and requirement of blind obedience to permeate the membership. Though the theme of violence passes largely unrecognized by faithful

readers of the Book of Mormon, it was occasionally lethal to those on the receiving end of Mormon aggression.

LEARN MORE

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